



State of Wisconsin
Department of Health and Family Services

Jim Doyle, Governor
Helene Nelson, Secretary

Contact: Stephanie Marquis, Communications Director
(608) 266-1683

For Immediate Release

Handling Pet Rodents Safely

(MADISON, August 12, 2005)—The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has informed state health officials there is a possibility that Wisconsin received pet rodents that could carry lymphocytic choriomeningitis virus, or LCMV.

“LCMV infection in humans is rare and we are not aware of any cases in Wisconsin,” said Dr. Jim Kazmierczak, State Public Health Veterinarian. “In fact, most people who become infected with LCMV never show symptoms or become ill.”

The CDC advised the Department of Health and Family Services that LCMV was detected in 3% of rodents at Mid-South Distributors in Ohio, a large commercial distributor of pet rodents that supplies pet stores in many states. The CDC told Wisconsin health officials that Mid-South records reference shipments to the state, but there are not any invoices naming specific pet stores. Major pet retailers PETsMART and PetCo told the Department that their Wisconsin stores have not received any rodents from Mid-South.

LCMV can be passed from infected rodents to humans, but infection in humans is rare. Symptoms are similar to those for influenza and include fever, stiff neck, lack of appetite, muscle aches, headache, nausea and vomiting. Talk to your doctor if you are experiencing symptoms and have been in contact with a rodent.

Pregnant women or people with a weakened immune system are more vulnerable to becoming seriously ill. The CDC recommends that the following high risk groups avoid any contact with all rodents:

- Anyone with an weakened immune system because of conditions such as HIV infection, cancer treatment or organ transplant
- Pregnant women
- Women who intend to become pregnant

High risk persons should ask a family member or friend to clean the cage and care for the pet – or ask someone to temporarily adopt the pet. Pregnant women should also avoid being near a rodent for an extended period of time and are advised to keep their pet in a separate part of the home. Although the risk of infection is low, LCMV could cause birth defects in the fetus. If rodents infest your home, they should be removed immediately. Contact your doctor if you are pregnant and exhibiting any symptoms.

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People with normal immune systems should follow basic precautions to stay healthy:

1. Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water after handling pet rodents or cleaning the cage; use waterless alcohol-based hand rubs when soap is not available.
2. Keep rodent cage clean and free of soiled bedding.
3. Clean the cage in a well-ventilated area or outside.
4. Do not kiss pet rodents or hold them close to your face.
5. Closely supervise young children handling pets. Ensure they wash their hands immediately after handling rodents, cages or bedding.

Earlier this year, LCMV was determined to be the cause of three organ transplant recipient deaths in Rhode Island, all of whom had received organs from the same donor. LCMV was later found in the organ donor's pet hamster which had originated from Mid-South Distributors.

More information about LCMV is available at <http://dhfs.wisconsin.gov/>.

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